

Speak Up!

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Some years ago, I learned the value of speaking up for what's right, regardless the consequences. Early in my career as an Army Aviator, I was told to close my pie hole and open my ears so I might learn something. I was careful not to judge other pilots' mistakes harshly because someday I might do something less than brilliant. Whether we admit it or not, we've all done something stupid.

My attitude changed when I had the unfortunate circumstance of being in the field with a unit that suffered a catastrophic Class A accident with multiple fatalities. The accident involved a single aircraft with a full crew and several troops on board. Only one passenger and the pilot survived.

The subsequent investigation determined the primary contributing cause of the accident was "hot dogging" the aircraft. The pilot in command was leaving the Army soon and wanted to give the Soldiers in the back a ride they'd never forget; unfortunately, they never got the chance. The aircraft's radar track showed it making radical heading changes, or bank angles, and traveling at an excessive speed before it struck a tree and crashed.

The devastating impact that tragic and totally unnecessary accident had on the unit and the deceased Soldiers' families was fresh in my mind when I took my next assignment a couple of years later. I was at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Fort Polk, La., working as an observer/controller for a sister company from our battalion. My duties included riding in the aircraft jump seat with a radio to monitor the aircraft in flight, ensuring compliance with JRTC rules of engagement.

One day I was told to fly jump seat with a PC I knew well and considered a friend. His career was rocky from the start; he'd had his PC orders pulled several times and was passed over twice for promotion to CW3. He also had a bad reputation for being stubborn and refusing to follow orders, qualities that directly contributed to his problems at work. Despite these setbacks, he'd finally reached retirement, dropped his paperwork and began counting down his last few months in uniform.

The pilot that day was the polar opposite of the PC. A staff captain from battalion, the PI had a meek personality and little flight experience. The PC sensed this and began teasing and intimidating the captain as soon as we got in the air. He was going to show him how you really fly a Black Hawk.

Keeping his promise, the PC, who was on the controls, became increasingly reckless. He was flying low and fast and banking the aircraft excessively, so much so that I had to grab my seat and hold on for the ride. We were behind on the map and flying fast on the confined JRTC real estate, and at one point we over flew a running aircraft at less than 100 feet. He quickly became autocratic and ignored complaints from me and the crew. He just laughed us off as a bunch of whiners.

A crew chief went to the standardization pilot to complain about the PC after the flight. The SP informally interviewed all the crewmembers and the PI and one crew chief corroborated the other crew chief's statement, but with less forceful language than they'd used in flight. He then came to me and asked me point blank if I thought the PC had been unsafe. I hated to dime out my friend because doing so would likely mean the end of his flying and our friendship.

I decided, however, the consequences of not speaking up were much greater and could be permanent, not just for the PC but for the crew and passengers on his aircraft. I admitted I thought he was unsafe and, as I predicted, the PC was grounded and never flew in the Army again. He confronted me later about what I'd said to the SP. I told him the truth, but he didn't agree and we haven't spoken since.

I'll never know for sure if I did the right thing that day or prevented an accident from happening sometime later. Maybe nothing ever would've happened, but I felt the potential cost of not speaking up was too high. We have a small margin of error in our line of work anyway, and no one should ever be allowed to court death under the guise of fun.

